

Ethiopia

Testing, awe-inspiring and heartbreaking – a journey you'll never forget. You don't explore Ethiopia for a relaxing getaway, you venture here to be moved. And moved you shall be.

Wade through incense into a medieval world hewn from stone in Lalibela, and watch the line between past and present blur while taking part in striking Christian ceremonies that haven't changed in 1000 years. Ethiopia's storied and sovereign history has left its wide-ranging and fertile highlands laden with historical treasures, ranging from ancient Aksumite tombs and obelisks to 17th-century castles and burnt-out Russian tanks. Many are more than a peek into the nation's past; they are a giant two-footed leap.

Ethiopia's landscapes are no less dramatic, and range from the Simien and Bale Mountains, which proffer tremendous trekking and innumerable interactions with dozens of animals and birds seen nowhere else on earth, to the Danakil Depression, an enchanting and unforgivingly hostile environment offering extreme adventure. The remote lowlands in the sultry southwest are also home to untold adventures and house some of Africa's most fascinating tribes.

Although it's anything but desert wasteland or a perpetual home of famine and war, Ethiopia is monetarily poor and travel here is tough, both physically and mentally. However, those willing to take some doses of displeasure with Ethiopia's bounty of treasure will be pleasantly rewarded.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1,098,000 sq km
- **ATMs** None that accept foreign cards
- **Borders** Kenya, Sudan, Djibouti, Somaliland
- **Budget** US\$10 to US\$50 a day
- **Capital** Addis Ababa
- **Languages** Amharic, Tigrinya, Oromo
- **Money** Birr; US\$1 = Birr8.8
- **Population** 74.8 million
- **Seasons** Wet season(mid-March to early October), very hot in lowlands (June to September)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 251; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 3
- **Visa** One-month visa US\$20 at airport; Ethiopian embassies charge more



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Lalibela** (p668) Question time, history and reality while wandering dumbfounded through the medieval rock-hewn maze of churches.
- **Simien Mountains** (p666) Trek to unparalleled precipices and Abyssinian abysses, and encounter bewildering 'bleeding heart' baboons.
- **Aksum** (p666) Descend into the darkness of ancient tombs or let your eyes follow 1800-year-old stelae skyward.
- **Bale Mountains** (p672) Register for Ethiopian Endemic Wildlife 101, start your trek and study to your heart's content.
- **Lower Omo Valley** (p671) Explore 'Africa's last great wilderness' and visit possibly the continent's most diverse and fascinating peoples.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Ethiopia's climate is typically very mild, with temperatures on the wide-ranging highlands averaging below 20°C. Only on the lowland fringes of western, eastern and southern Ethiopia can temperatures soar past 30°C.

Rains traditionally fall mid-March to early October, making the rest of the year prime time to visit. Directly after the rains the highlands are wonderfully green, covered with wildflowers and sublime for trekking.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Those simply filling the gap between Sudan and Kenya could blaze through in two weeks, though you'd be missing the opportunity of a lifetime. Africa's Camelot, Gonder (p665) is first, before Bahir Dar (p664) and the island monasteries of Lake Tana (p664). Next is Addis Ababa (p656) for splendid dining and museum action. Break the long haul south to Kenya at Awasa (p671).
- **One Month** Complete the north's historical circuit: after Addis Ababa (p656), loop north through Bahir Dar (p664), Lake Tana (p664) and Gonder (p665) before trekking the glorious Simien Mountains (p666). The tombs and stelae of Aksum (p666) are next before the mesmerising rock-hewn churches of Lalibela (p668).
- **Two Months** Mix Harar (p669) in eastern Ethiopia and the wildlife and tribes of Lower Omo Valley (p671) with the one-month itinerary above.

HOW MUCH?

- **Steaming macchiato** US\$0.13
- **100km by bus** US\$1.50 to US\$3
- **Minibus across town** US\$0.13
- **Internet per hour** US\$2.50 to US\$3.50
- **Tip for helpful priest** US\$0.60 to US\$1.15

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.65
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.45
- **Bottle of Bedele beer** US\$0.45
- **Souvenir T-Shirt** US\$3 to US\$6
- **Roasted barley** US\$0.13

HISTORY

Ethiopia's human history dates back at least 4.4 million years, landing it squarely in East Africa's heralded Cradle of Humanity. Recorded history dates to 1500 BC, when a civilisation with Sabaean influences briefly blossomed at Yeha.

Kingdom of Aksum

This kingdom, ranking among the ancient world's most powerful, rose shortly after 400 BC. Its capital, Aksum, sat in a fertile area lying at an important commercial crossroads between Egypt, Sudan's gold fields and the Red Sea. At its height the kingdom extended well into Arabia.

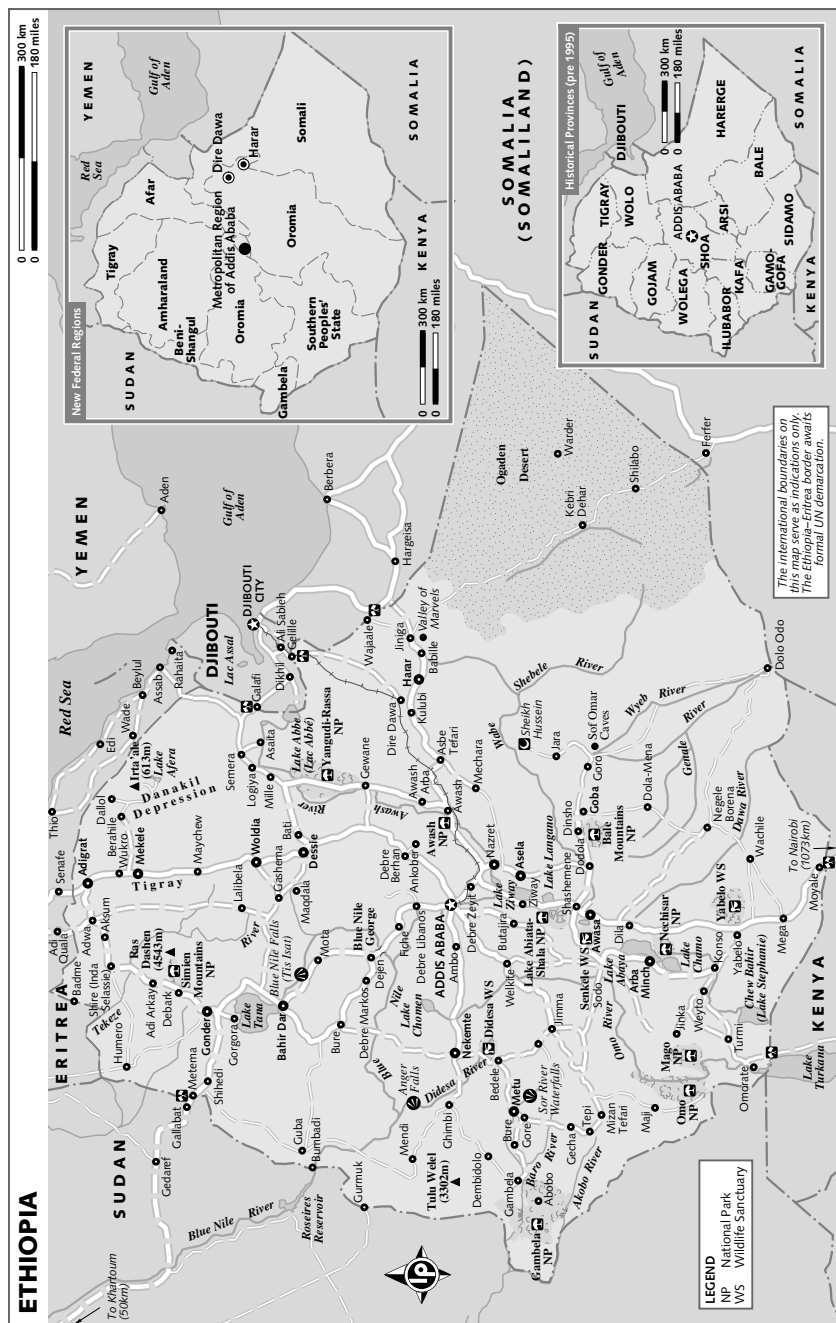
Aksum flourished on trade, exporting frankincense, grain, skins, apes and, particularly, ivory. In turn, exotic imports returned from Egypt, Arabia and India. Aksumite architecture was incredible, and Aksum's impressive monuments still stand today (p666).

The 4th century brought Christianity, which enveloped Aksum and would shape Ethiopia's future spiritual, cultural and intellectual life.

Aksum flourished until the 7th century, when its trading empire was fatally isolated by the rise of Arabs and Islam in Arabia. Ethiopia soon sank into its 'dark ages', a period that has left little evidence.

Early Dynasties

The Zagwe dynasty eventually rose around Lalibela in 1137. Although only lasting until



1270, it produced arguably Ethiopia's greatest treasures: the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela (p668). Despite the architectural wonders, this period remains shrouded in mystery as stones weren't inscribed, and no chronicles were written. The dynasty was overthrown by Yekuno Amlak, self-professed descendant of King Solomon and Queen Sheba. His 'Solomonic dynasty' would reign for 500 years.

Although Islam expanded into eastern Ethiopia during the 12th and 14th centuries, it wasn't until the late 15th century, when Ottoman Turks intervened, that hostilities erupted. After jihad was declared on the Christian highlands, Ethiopia experienced some of the worst bloodshed in its history. Only Portuguese intervention helped save the Christian empire.

Towards a United Empire

Filling the power vacuum created by the weakened Muslims, Oromo pastoralists and warriors migrated from what is now Kenya. For 200 years intermittent conflict raged. Two 17th-century emperors, Za-Dengel and Susenyos, even went as far as conversion to Catholicism to gain the military support of Portuguese Jesuits. The Muslim state wasn't immune to Oromo might either; Harar's old city walls were built in response to their conflicts.

In 1636 Emperor Fasiladas founded Ethiopia's first permanent capital since Lalibela. By the close of the 17th century, Gonder boasted magnificent palaces, beautiful gardens and extensive plantations. However, during the 18th century, assassination and intrigue became the order of the day, the ensuing chaos reading like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Gonder collapsed in the mid-19th century and Ethiopia disintegrated into a cluster of feuding fiefdoms.

The shattered empire was eventually reunified by Kassa Haylu, who crowned himself Emperor Tewodros. However, his lofty ambitions and pride led him to cross the British, resulting in his death. His successor, Yohannes IV, fought to the throne with weapons gained by aiding the British during their Tewodros campaign. Later, Menelik II continued acquiring weaponry, using it to thrash the advancing Italians in 1896, saving Ethiopia from colonialism.

In 1936 Mussolini gained revenge as Italian troops overran Ethiopia. They occupied it until capitulating to British forces in 1941.

The Derg to Democracy

By 1973 a radical military group, known as the Derg, had emerged. They used the media with consummate skill to undermine and eventually depose Emperor Haile Selassie, before their leader, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, declared Ethiopia a socialist state in 1974.

Despite internal tensions, external threats initially posed the Derg's biggest problem. Only state-of-the-art weaponry, gifted by the Soviet Union, allowed them to beat back Somalia's 1977 invasion. In Eritrea, however, the secessionists continued to thwart Ethiopian offensives.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea War

During the 1980s, numerous Ethiopian armed liberation movements arose. For years, with limited weaponry, they fought the Soviet-backed Derg's military might.

When Mengistu lost Soviet backing after the Cold War, his days were numbered and the rebel Ethiopian and Eritrean coalition forces finally claimed victory in 1991.

After the smoke cleared, Eritrea was immediately granted independence, Mengistu's failed socialist policies were abandoned, and in 1995 the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was proclaimed. Elections followed, and the second republic's constitution was inaugurated. Meles Zenawi, as prime minister, formed a new government.

Despite being friends who fought together against the Derg for over a decade, Meles Zenawi and Eritrea's President Isaias soon clashed. Bickering over Eritrea's exchange-rate system for their new currency led to Eritrea occupying the border town of Badme in 1998. Soon full-scale military conflict broke out, leaving tens of thousands dead on both sides before ceasing in mid-2000. The settlement included the installation of an OAU-UN buffer zone on Eritrean soil.

Ethiopia Today

Ethiopia is again at a poignant period in its history. Controversial 2005 elections and the government's heavy-handed reprisals have cast doubts on democracy, and everyone's hoping another democratic freedom fighter hasn't turned dictator.

Despite many opposition members being unjustly jailed, their parties continue to rally, and in mid-2006 Ethiopia's largest opposition

party formed a new political alliance with Ethiopia's four largest rebel groups.

If internal political turmoil wasn't enough, relations with Eritrea heated up again in late 2005. Things are still tense as Ethiopia occupies Badme (awarded to Eritrea by the UN) and Eritrea refuses to allow UN helicopters to monitor troop movements along the border.

The southern front took an interesting turn in August 2006, when Ethiopian troops entered Somalia in support of the Somali government's fight against the Islamic militia who control Mogadishu. Things escalated in December 2006, when Ethiopia officially declared war against the Somali Islamic militia and launched air attacks on several Somalia border towns.

CULTURE

Religion, and intense pride in Ethiopia's past, resonate loudly within most people. To them, Ethiopia has stood out from all African nations and proved itself utterly unique – home to its own culture, language, script, calendar and history. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike celebrate that Ethiopia was the only African nation to thwart European colonial aspirations.

Ethiopians have a strong sense of formality and attach great importance to etiquette, especially greetings and dress. However, some younger Ethiopians who've grown up with high-profile international aid efforts lack the patriotism seen in older generations. Their Ethiopian pride and self-reliance has been undermined, albeit unintentionally.

Other than religion, it's agriculture and pastoralism that fill the days of over 80% of Ethiopians. Everyone is involved, right down to stick- and stone-wielding four-year-old children, who are handed the responsibility of herding their families' livestock.

With most toiling in the fields, it's not surprising that only 38.5% of Ethiopians are literate. Only 52% of children attend primary school; a mere 12% attend secondary school. If all children under 16 attended school, Ethiopia's workforce would be ravaged, as almost half of Ethiopia's population would be attending classes.

Families are incredibly close, and most children live with their parents until marriage. After marriage, couples usually join the husband's parents' household. Eventually, they'll request land for a house.

PEOPLE

Ethiopia's population is about to exceed 75 million, astounding considering 1935's population was just 15 million. If this growth continues, Ethiopia will have 120 million citizens in 2025. Though a trend of urbanisation is emerging, 84% live in rural areas.

Although 83 languages and 200 dialects are spoken, the population can be divided into eight broad groups: Oromo (40%), Amhara (21%), Tigrayan (11%), Sidama (9%), Somali (6%), Afar (4%), Gurage (2%) and Harari (less than 2%). Under 'ethnic federalism', the modern federal regions are demarcated largely along these ethnic-linguistic lines.

Faith is paramount to most Ethiopians. Although Christians only slightly outnumber Muslims (45% to 35%), Christianity has dominated history. Most Highlanders are Orthodox, and Christianity heavily influences the highlands' political, social and cultural scene. Most Muslims inhabit the lowlands, but significant populations live in Ethiopia's predominantly Christian highland cities.

Numerous traditional African beliefs are still practised by 11% of Ethiopians, particularly in the southern and western lowlands.

ARTS

The church, traditionally enjoying almost as much authority as the state, is responsible for both inspiring Ethiopia's art forms and stifling them with its great conservatism. Long neglected and ignored, the cultural contributions of other ethnic groups are finally receiving credit and attention.

Today, music is an extremely important part of most Ethiopians' lives. Whether it's the solemn sounds of drums resonating from a church, the hilarious ad-libbing of *azmaris* (see boxed text, p662) or Ethiopian pop blaring in a bus, Ethiopian music is as interesting as it is unavoidable.

Dance is equally significant, playing parts in religious festivities and social occasions, such as weddings and funerals. In the past, dancing motivated warriors before battle.

ENVIRONMENT

Ethiopia's topography is remarkably diverse, ranging from the vast central plateau (Ethiopian highlands), with elevations between 1800m and 4543m, to one of the earth's lowest points: the infamous Danakil Depression, sinking 120m below sea level. The highlands

supply four large river systems, the most famous being the Blue Nile.

Southern Ethiopia is bisected by the Rift Valley. Averaging 50km wide, it stretches to Mozambique. The valley hosts several lakes; most are havens for birdlife, while others are homes for crocodiles. The Rift Valley's northern end opens into the Danakil Depression.

Ethiopia's flora and fauna reflect the diverse topography and host numerous species seen nowhere else on earth. Unfortunately, demographic pressures are putting the environment under extreme pressure, and 95% of Ethiopia's original forest has been lost.

There are three wildlife sanctuaries and nine national parks, including the justifiably honoured Simien and Bale Mountains National Parks.

FOOD & DRINK

Ethiopia's food is much like Ethiopia, completely different from the rest of Africa. Plates, bowls and utensils are replaced by *injera*, a unique pancake of countrywide proportions. Atop its rubbery confines sits anything from *kai wat* (spicy meat stew) to colourful dollops of *gomen* (minced spinach) and *tere sega* (cubes of raw beef).

Whether it's *bebere* (famous Ethiopian spice) joyfully bringing tears to your eyes, or clammy *injera*'s slightly sour taste sending your tongue into convulsions, one thing's certain: Ethiopian fare provokes strong reactions. It's quite varied and complex, so experiment to find something that pleasantly tickles your tongue – it's so cheap, mistakes aren't costly.

Ethiopia is the original home of coffee, which is still ubiquitous. Sip a *macchiato* made from a vintage Italian espresso machine, or sit for a traditional coffee ceremony. Another beverage you must savour is *tej* (honey wine).

ADDIS ABABA

pop 2.8 million

On first observing Addis Ababa ('New Flower' in Amharic) a little over a century ago, one foreigner called it 'noisy, dusty, sprawling and shambolic'. Over the next century this tented camp has morphed into a modern business centre and Africa's fourth-largest city, yet travellers still turn up and utter the same

phrase. If that isn't reason enough to discount first impressions, we don't know what is!

Give 'Addis', as it's commonly known, a few days and you'll appreciate its bizarre blend of past and present: the coexistence of old imperial statues alongside hammer-and-sickle placards of the former Marxist regime, and the juxtaposition of wattle-and-daub huts with austere Italian Fascist buildings and luxurious hotels. Lift the city's skin and the same contrasts apply: *tej* beats still serve traditional honey wine and *azmaris* sing centuries-old songs, while a few blocks on, martinis glow and modern beats rain down in hip bars. On wide boulevards, priests in medieval-looking robes mix with African bureaucrats, Western aid workers, young Ethiopian women with mobile phones and the odd herd of goats.

It won't be long until you say 'Addis' like you were talking about an old friend.

ORIENTATION

Massive and incoherent, Addis has been likened to a sprawling 250-sq-km *injera* adorned with piles of *tibs*, spaghetti, *mahabaroui* and Szechwan noodles. To navigate, break Addis down into these distinct dishes/districts. The smoking *tibs*, representing the city centre (or meaty part), is found at Churchill Ave's southern end (now Gambia St). Here you'll find government and commercial buildings.

The steaming spaghetti symbolizes Piazza, a district atop the hill at Churchill Ave's north end, whose legacy is owed to Italian occupation. It houses budget hotels, cafés and bars.

East of Piazza is Addis Ababa University, several museums and the landmark roundabouts of Arat Kilo and Siddist Kilo. South from there is Menelik II Ave, which boasts the UN's Africa Hall and the ugly Meskal Sq. This melange of attributes is likened to a meal of this, that and everything (*mahabaroui*).

Thanks to the new Chinese-built ring road, Addis' southeast, around Bole Rd, is thriving with exciting development that contrasts sharply with the rest of the city. You guessed it – the Szechwan noodles!

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Africans Bookshop (Hailesilase St) Second-hand books on Ethiopia.

Bookworld Friendship City Center (Bole Rd); Haile Gebreselassie Rd (Haile Gebreselassie Rd); Lime Tree Restaurant (Bole Rd); Piazza (Wavel St) Perfect for books and magazines.

Cultural Centres

Alliance-Ethio Français (☎ 0111 550213; www.allianceaddis.org; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Internet, library, pleasant gardens and a café. Check website for cultural events. It's off Dejazmach Ummar Semeter St.

British Council (☎ 0111 115496; bc.addisababa@et.britishcouncil.org; Hailesilase St; ☎ 2-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Newspapers and internet.

Goethe Institut (☎ 0111 242345; www.goethe.de/af/add; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Library, internet café and exhibition hall. It's off Algeria St.

Istituto Italiano di Cultura (☎ 0111 553427; icc.addisababa@ethionet.et; Dejazmach Belay Zeleke St; ☎ 8.30am-2pm Mon-Fri & 3.30-6.30pm Tue & Thu) Cultural events.

Emergency

Emergency 24-hour numbers:

Fire brigade (☎ 993)

Police (☎ 991)

Red Cross Ambulance service (☎ 992)

Internet Access

Although internet abounds, fast connections are rare. Some convenient outlets are listed here.

Cyber Easy Internet Cafe (Bole Rd; per hr Birr21)

Internet Cafe (Bole Rd; per hr Birr15) Open Sundays from 8.30am to 9pm.

Kibsol (Adwa Ave; per hr Birr12)

Megel Internet Service (Ras Desta Damtew St; per hr Birr15)

Nina Internet Service (Mundy St; per hr Birr15) CD burning costs Birr4.

Internet Resources

WhatsUp! Addis (www.whatsupaddis.com) A great site highlighting cultural and entertainment events.

Media

Look out for the monthly *What's Up!*, listing restaurants, shopping venues, nightclubs and events.

Medical Services

Bethzatha Hospital (☎ 0115 514141; off Ras Mekonen Ave; ☎ 24hr) Private hospital recommended by embassies.

Ethio-Swe Dental Clinic (☎ 0116 614932; Bole Rd) Respected dental office.

Hayat Hospital (☎ 0116 624488; Ring Rd; ☎ 24hr) Respected and reliable. Consultations cost Birr40.

St Gabriel Hospital (☎ 0116 613622; Djibouti St; ☎ 24hr) Private hospital with X-ray, dental, surgery and laboratory facilities. Consultations cost Birr50.

Money

Numerous Commercial Bank branches and copious private banks, like Dashen, United and Wegagen, will change cash and travellers cheques. Branches in hotels keep longer hours.

Only Dashen offer Visa and MasterCard cash advances (up to US\$500). Commission is 5.5% (minimum US\$12.50).

Post

Junior post offices Meskal Sq (cnr Menelik II Ave & Meskal Sq); Mexico (Ras Abebe Aregay St); Piazza (Cunningham St) Postal services for postcards and letters only.

Main post office (Ras Desta Damtew St) Poste-restante and international-parcel services.

Telephone & Fax

The numerous yellow phone boxes take 10¢ coins; many accept phonecards.

Air's Business Center (Democratic Republic Congo St) Cheap international calls via internet.

Telecommunications office (☎ 0115 514977; Gam-bia St) International calls at standard rates (p674).

Tourist Information

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 0115 512310; Meskal Sq; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30pm-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-11.30am & 1.30pm-5.30pm Fri) Helpful, providing Addis information and tips for elsewhere.

Travel Agencies

These are some recommended agencies in Addis, but it is far from exhaustive.

Bahir Dar Tour & Travel Agency (☎ 0111 550546; bdtta@ethionet.et; Churchill Ave)

Green Land Tours & Travels (☎ 0116 185875; www.greenlandethiopia.com; Cameroon St)

Hess Travel Ethiopia (☎ 0115 520955; www.hess.travel.com; Bole Rd)

NTO (www.nto.com) Hilton Hotel (☎ 0115 151722; Menelik II Ave); Ras Desta Damtew St (☎ 0115 514838; Ras Desta Damtew St)

Travel Ethiopia (www.travelethiopia.com) National Hotel (☎ 0115 525478; Menelik II Ave); Ghion Hotel (☎ 0911 206976)

Village Ethiopia (☎ 0115 523497; www.village-ethiopia.net; National Hotel, Menelik II Ave)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Violent crime is, fortunately, rare, particularly where visitors are concerned. However, petty theft and confidence tricks are problematic.

The Merkato is worst, as pickpockets abound – targeting *faranjis* (foreigners) and

ADDIS ABABA



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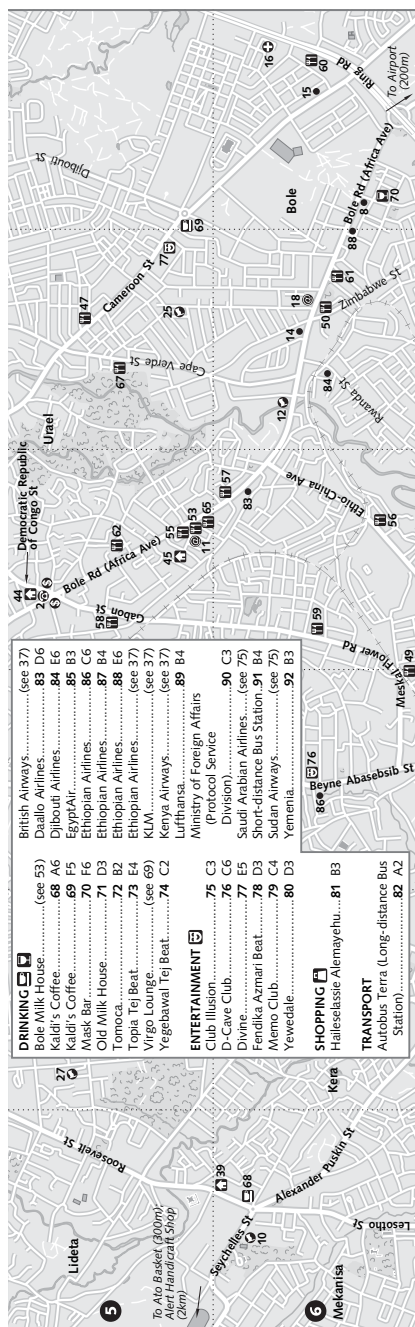
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Ethiopians. Other spots requiring vigilance include Piazza, Meskal Sq, minibus stands, and Churchill Ave.

Beware of distraction tactics (some involving someone enthusiastically grabbing your ankles, while others pilfer pockets!).

SIGHTS

Set within Haile Selassie's former palace and surrounded by Addis Ababa University's beautiful gardens and fountains is the enthralling **Ethnological Museum** (Algeria St; adult/student Birr20/10; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun). The vibrant exhibition gives great insights into Ethiopia's rich cultures.

Although less visually stimulating than the Ethnological Museum, the **national museum** (☎ 0111 117150; King George VI St; admission Birr10; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) is no less thought-provoking. Its collection ranks among sub-Saharan Africa's most important. The palaeontology exhibit contains two remarkable casts of 3.2-million-year-old **Lucy**, a famously fossilised upright hominid discovered in 1974. Upstairs are some celebrated Ethiopian artworks.

Off Niger St, the massive, ornate **Holy Trinity cathedral** (admission Birr25; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) is Ethiopia's second-most important place of worship. It's also the final resting place of Emperor Haile Selassie and his wife. Their massive Aksumite-style granite tombs, complete with lions' feet, are a sight indeed.

Commissioned by Emperor Menelik commemorating his stunning 1896 defeat of the Italians in Adwa, the Piazza **St George Cathedral** (Fitawrari Gebeyehu St) was completed in 1911. The Holy of Holies' outer walls are covered in paintings and mosaics by renowned artists, like Afewerk Tekle.

Just outside the cathedral is the **museum** (admission Birr20; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun), which contains Ethiopia's best collection of ecclesiastical paraphernalia outside St Mary of Zion in Aksum.

Wading into the market chaos known as **Merkato** (☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat), west of the centre, can be as rewarding as it is exasperating. You may find the most evocative aroma wafting from precious incense. You may find your wallet stolen and stinky shit on your shoe.

Some people say it's Africa's largest market, but as its exact boundaries are as shady as some of its characters, we'll refrain from adding our name to that list – let's just say it's mighty, mighty huge.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Although Addis doesn't boast any major festivals of its own, it's a great place to catch the national festivals of Leddēt, Timkat and Meskel. For festival dates see p673.

SLEEPING

Accommodation runs the gamut in Addis – brandish flip flops and battle with omnipotent insects, or sink into your sumptuous Sheraton suite. It's all up to you, your budget and the might of your flip flops.

Budget

Wutma Hotel (☎ 0111 562878; wutma@yahoo.com; Mundy St; d Birr60) Perhaps it's our fault that Wutma always played second fiddle to Baro Hotel (its neighbour), but we say NO LONGER! It lacks Baro's garden atmosphere and cosy TV nook, but its smallish grey-walled rooms outshine most of Baro's. It lacks parking.

Wanza Hotel (☎ 0115 504893; Democratic Republic Congo St; d Birr70) Despite sporadic hot water and the continued presence of occasional insects behind the boilers (they're getting smaller though!), this Bole option, with cosy rooms, comfortable beds, clean bathrooms and a helpful owner, is one of the best budget options.

Itegue Taitu Hotel (☎ 0111 560787; exod2005@yahoo.com; tw with bathroom Birr115-167, without Birr46-115) Just south of De Gaulle Sq in Piazza, this charming but well-worn hotel was built by Empress Taitu in 1907. Rooms range from small, stark and skanky in the rear annex, to large and historic in the original building.

Lido Hotel (☎ 0115 533247; lido@ethionet.et; Sudan St; s Birr144-213, d Birr161) Set behind doum palms and cactus plants, this central, pleasant and clean hotel has 11 reasonably priced rooms. Rooms 8 and 9 (Birr161) are the brightest.

Midrange

Extreme Hotel (☎ 0111 553777; epistouch@ethionet.et; Gaston Guez St; s US\$20-29, tw US\$28-35) Extreme it is. Great 1st-floor rooms have shiny tile floors, contemporary furnishings, satellite TVs, and free breakfasts, and are utterly spotless. The cheaper 2nd- and 3rd-floor rooms host stained carpets and lack charm (and free breakfast).

Weygoss Guest House (☎ 0115 512205; www.weygoss.com; s/d/tw incl breakfast US\$26/35/43) Hidden up an alley just north of Bole Rd's Ethio Supermarket, Weygoss represents great value and is perfect for families. Bright doubles have

parquet floors, balconies, satellite TVs and separate kitchens.

King's Hotel (☎ 0113 711300; kingshotel@ethionet.et; Roosevelt St; d incl breakfast US\$37) With great service and large, bright rooms hosting vibrant walls, balconies and satellite TVs, this hotel in Addis' southwest is ideal. The furniture, like the bathrooms, are not new but are perfectly preserved.

Semien Hotel (☎ 0111 550067; semienhotel@ethionet.et; Dejazmach Belay Zeleke St; s/d/tw incl breakfast US\$32/38/43, ste US\$54-60) With a lofty location above Piazza, this hotel offers sweet vistas. The cosy, compact and clean rooms lack character, but host balconies and satellite TVs. Add a 7th-floor panoramic lounge and it's one of the best-value midrange options.

Ras Amba Hotel (☎ 0111 228088; rahot@ethionet.et; Queen Elizabeth II St; s/d/ste US\$36/48/60; ☎) East of Piazza and affording superb city views is this charming (albeit pink) choice. There's a gorgeous rooftop terrace, and rooms are relatively modern and comfortable. Most have balconies and satellite TVs.

Top End

The following hotels tack on a 15% VAT and 10% service charge to the bill.

Hilton Hotel (☎ 0115 518400; hilton.addis@ethionet.et; Menelik II Ave; s/d from US\$130/145; ☎ ☎ ☎) Although lacking the Sheraton's panache, and showing its age in areas, the high-rise Hilton still makes for a splendid stay. It's laden with facilities.

Sheraton Hotel (☎ 0115 171717; www.sheraton.com/addis; Itegue Taitu St; s/d from US\$265/313, deluxe ste US\$3817, villa US\$8081; ☎ ☎ ☎) One of Africa's most elite hotels, it's astounding and the epitome of class. No expense has been spared: from Persian carpets and original Ethiopian paintings to furnishings plated with 24-carat Ethiopian gold. DVD players, satellite TVs, personal safes and three phones (at desk, bed and toilet) are found in each room.

EATING

Many restaurants, particularly the smarter ones, add 15% tax and 10% service charge to their bills; check before you order.

Ethiopian

Many restaurants offer a 'traditional experience': traditional food (called 'national food') in traditional surroundings with traditional music in the evening.

17 17 (Cameroon St; mains Birr8-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) This local, atmospheric option is usually alive with action. The food isn't the best, but it's filling and cheap. Look for lights in a tree next to a well-lit butcher.

Addis Ababa Restaurant (mains Birr11-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) Feeling like a neglected museum, this long-standing Piazza favourite continues to churn out great Ethiopian dishes and pure *tej* (it has its own brewery). It's off Benin St.

Habesha Restaurant (Bole Rd; mains Birr20-27; ☎ lunch & dinner) For a meal that looks as good as it tastes, come to this fashionable Bole eatery where serving is an art form. There's also live music and traditional dancing every night at 8pm.

Dashen Traditional Restaurant (mains Birr15-40; ☎ lunch & dinner) The soft lighting and intimate surrounds are perfect for your first awkward attempts at *injera*. It saved us from embarrassment after accidentally inhaling *berbere* – don't ask! It's off Itege Taitu St.

Shangri-la Restaurant (Cape Verde St; mains Birr17-50; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is an atmospheric place to head for *tere sega*, which is available on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. There's an outdoor dining area and a cosy bar serving quality *tej*.

Agelgil (mains Birr22-55; ☎ lunch & dinner) Off Meskal Flower Rd, tucked down a dirt track next to the railway tracks, is this great option. There's live dancing and music every night, except Wednesday, at 7pm.

European

Leah's House British Restaurant (Ring Rd; mains Birr15-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Wield your fork like a Brit possessed and massacre Cornish pasties, full English breakfasts or a steak-and-kidney pies. It's the real deal – enjoy!

Lime Tree (Bole Rd; mains Birr17-34; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tuck into a pita stuffed with *tabouleh* or falafel, or savour a chicken coconut curry. Its creative juices are thirst slayers.

Blue Tops Restaurant (King George VI St; mains Birr24-50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Opposite the National Museum, and the haunt of expats, this airy restaurant serves flavourful pastas (some vegetarian options), calzones and heavenly ice-cream sundaes. Pizzas join the parade evenings and at lunch Sunday.

Top View (mains Birr24-52; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) We could talk about the cannelloni, Parma ham and fresh seafood, but we're still thinking of its gorgeous view.

Serenade (☎ 0911 200072; mains Birr45-75; ☎ dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun) Tucked up a dark cobblestone alley in eastern Piazza is this magnificent Mediterranean eatery. Peruse the creative menu, laden with succulent treats like braised lamb with caramelized onions, lentils, lemon and raisin orange couscous. There are vegetarian delights and divine desserts.

Ristorante Castelli (☎ 0111 571757; Mahatma-Gandhi St; mains Birr50-80; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Famous clientele and fabulous Italian fare. We joyfully devoured the *fettuccine al tartufo* (fettuccini in truffle sauce) at this Piazza palace.

Other filling stations:

Family Restaurant (Ethio-China Ave; mains Birr18-45; ☎ lunch & dinner) Size large servings of Tex-Mex fare.

Le Jardin (Meskal Flower Rd; mains Birr25-43; ☎ lunch & dinner) Mmm...pizza.

Asian

Sangam Restaurant (Bole Rd; mains Birr20-40; ☎ lunch & dinner) If you've got a craving for a cracking curry, try this atmospheric option.

Aladdin (Zimbabwe St; mains Birr18-42; ☎ lunch & dinner) An Armenian restaurant serving mouth-watering hummus, *tabouleh* and *kuefteh* (spicy meatballs).

Jewel of India (Gabon St; mains Birr25-72; ☎ lunch & dinner) Another great Indian eatery, with more than 150 dishes.

Cafés

Cafés and pastry shops are omnipresent and they are perfect for early-morning and afternoon pick-me-ups.

City Café & Pastry (Bole Rd; pastries Birr2-4) Educated in the art of apple strudel and other delicious delicacies while in the States, the owner produces some of Addis' best pastries.

Pasticceria Gelateria – Roby's Pastry (Bole Rd; desserts Birr4-7) Doles out refreshing homemade ice cream and mouth-watering cakes.

Raizel Café (Hailasilase St; meals Birr9-18) This slick modern café speedily serves tasty cheese burgers, tuna melts, French fries and breakfast omelettes.

Café Miru (Gambia St; meals Birr11-17) Besides great pastries, cakes and coffee, the upper section serves some decent meals.

Self-Catering

Novis Supermarket (Bole Rd Area (Bole Rd); Southwest (Roosevelt St) Boasting the likes of brie, taleggio, gorgonzola and gouda, it's heaven for

cheese-lovers. You'll find Italian prosciutto, wine and chocolate too.

Ethio Supermarket (Bole Rd) It never closes and is well stocked – enough said.

DRINKING Cafés

There are hundreds of good cafés, though the following stand out.

Tomoca (Wavel St; coffees Birr2) Coffee is serious business at this old Italian Piazza café, where beans are roasted on-site.

Kaldi's Coffee (coffees Birr3-14) Southwest (Roosevelt St); East (Cameroon St) While lawyers may eventually kibosh Kaldi's Starbucks-like sign, logo, interior, uniforms and menu, thirsty expats dropping Birr14 for fabulous frappuccinos will ensure Kaldi's contagious coffee lives on.

Pubs & Bars

With the recent addition of several chic bars in the Bole area, Addis' bar scene is more diverse than ever. Piazza continues to ooze with smaller unnamed places catering to locals wanting to let loose.

Virgo Lounge (Cameroon St; ☹ closed Mon) This hip drinking den sits above Kaldi's Coffee in southeastern Addis. It's an ideal place to kick back and chill out.

Top View (☹ closed Monday) A sunset drink on this remarkable restaurant's panoramic deck in eastern Addis is escapism at its best.

Old Milk House (Josif Tito St) A popular place, though laden with expats chatting up local ladies.

Mask Bar is as gaudy as it is cool. The crowd ranges from expats to well-heeled locals. It's well signposted off Bole Rd.

Off Bole Rd, behind City Café & Pastry, Bole Milk House is a perfect place to warm up for an evening on the town. There's a camp fire by the outdoor bar and Western music that you don't have to scream over.

Tej Beats

If authentic experiences are what you're after, then there's no better place than a *tej beat* (pronounced 'tedj bet') to down the famed golden elixir (honey wine). Traditionally for men, women should keep low profiles. They lack signs, so ask locals for directions.

Topia Tej Beat (☹ 10am-10pm) Off Haile Gebreselassie Rd, tucked up an alley behind the Axum Hotel, this is Addis' top *tej beat* and the only one to serve pure honey *tej*. A small

flask (Birr3.50) on an empty stomach had our heads spinning.

Yegebawal Tej Beat (☹ 10am-10pm) For a more rough-and-ready experience, head for Yegebawal Tej Beat off Lorenzo Tezaz St. The *tej* is dirt cheap, but it's not pure as sugar has been added.

ENTERTAINMENT Nightclubs

Addis' nightlife is slowly maturing, with modern clubs joining the circuit, and music almost gaining prominence over prostitution. Cover charges vary between Birr15 and Birr30. You'll drop Birr15 to Birr20 per drink.

Male travellers beware, most single Ethiopian women encountered are still prostitutes.

Divine (2nd fl, Sheger Bldg, Cameroon St) Slip into a sleek leather lounge, sip a cocktail and groove to heavy hip-hop and rap in this slick new nightclub.

Club Illusion (cnr Ras Desta Damtew & Itegue Taitu St; ☹ Thu-Sat) This is Addis' most raucous club. It's below the Ambassador Theatre.

D-Cave Club (Beyene Abasebsib St; ☹ Thu-Sat) Lurking in southwest Addis Ababa, D-Cave hosts well-known DJs most weekends. Music ranges from Ethiopian to hip-hop and drum and base.

Off Bole Rd, Memo Club is another of Addis' hot spots. Sadly, it's also popular with expats shopping for prostitutes.

Azmari Beats

Yewedale (Zewditu St) Thanks to some of the city's best *azmaris* (see below) performing here, this place is resoundingly popular and you may have trouble finding a seat. There's no sign, so just look for the thatched twin-peaked roof above its entrance.

AZMARI ACTION

An ancient entertainment that continues today is that provided by the *azmari* (wandering minstrel) and his *masenko* (single-stringed fiddle). Within *azmari beats*, *azmaris* prance around grass-covered floors and sing about everything from history and sex, to your funny haircut. Although you won't understand a word (it's all in Amharic), you'll end up laughing. And remember two things: it's all in good fun and hair always grows back!

Fendika Azmari Beat (Zewditu St) This *azmari* beat rivals Yewedale and is only a few minutes' walk down the street.

SHOPPING

Most cheap souvenir stalls sit around Churchill Ave and the Piazza – haggling is always the way of the day!

Haileselassie Alemayehu (Churchill Ave) This shop sells a wide array of items, like paintings, baskets, icons, woodcarvings and traditional clothing. Thanks to fixed (and fair) prices, there's no hassle here.

Entoto Market (Entoto Ave) Interested in picking up some blankets or traditional clothing like a *shamma* (toga)? Head to these street stalls a few hundred metres north of Botswana St and the Spanish embassy. Unlike Churchill Ave or the Piazza, this is where the locals do their shopping.

Ato Basket shop (Mauritania St) Southwest of the centre, on the roadside, is Addis' best place for baskets.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Ethiopian Airlines (www.flyethiopian.com) is the only domestic carrier, regularly serving over a dozen Ethiopian destinations. They have numerous offices around Addis Ababa. See relevant cities. Getting There & Away sections for fares from Addis.

For information regarding international carriers serving Addis, see p675.

Bus

Journeys less than 150km are served from the central **short-distance bus station** (Ras Mekonen Ave), while longer journeys depart from **Auto-bus Terra** (Central African Republic St), northwest of Merkato. Buses for the following destinations leave officially at 6.30am:

Destination	Fare (Birr)	Duration
Aksum	109.70	2½ days
Arba Minch	51.50	12 hours
Awasa	28.75	6 hours
Bahir Dar via Dangala	60.75	1½ days
Bahir Dar via Mota	56.35	12 hours
Dire Dawa	52.65	11 hours
Gonder	82.50	2 days
Jinka	84.35	2 days
Lalibela	75	2 days
Moyale	79	1½ days

SHOPPING FOR A CAUSE

There are shops that are a great way to support the city's hard-working less fortunate. At **Alert Handicraft Shop** (☎ 0113 211518; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat), the Berhan Taye Leprosy Disabled Persons Work Group produce and sell beautiful items emblazoned with vibrant embroidery. **Former Women's Fuelwood Carriers Project** (☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Sat), a modest little shop tucked about 300m west of Entoto Market, sells colourful hand-woven shawls.

Minibus

Speedy minibuses serving Bahir Dar and Gonder are cropping up more and more. There's no station per se, but commission agents patrol for customers near the Wutma Hotel in Piazza. Prices are negotiable; note that locals usually pay from Birr120 to Birr150 for Bahir Dar and Birr150 to Birr180 for Gonder.

Train

Trains used to be scheduled to depart for Dire Dawa (Birr75/55/41 in 1st/2nd/3rd class) at 3pm Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, though they rarely ever left on time – now they're not leaving at all. Currently only the Dire Dawa–Djibouti City section is operating.

GETTING AROUND

There's an extensive network of blue-and-white minibuses servicing Addis that is efficient and cheap. Stopping at most major intersections, journeys cost from Birr0.55 to Birr1.25.

Taxis are also everywhere. Journeys up to 3km usually cost Birr20 (more at night), while medium/long journeys cost Birr30/50. If you share, the normal fare is split between passengers.

Bole International Airport, located just 5km southeast of the city centre, is regularly served by both taxis (Birr25 to Birr50) and minibuses.

NTO (☎ 0115 151722; Hilton Hotel, Menelik II Ave) offers airport pick-ups and drop-offs in a Mercedes-Benz for a reasonable Birr44 (Birr55 after midnight).

NORTHERN ETHIOPIA

BAHIR DAR

pop 166,900

Although this is one of Ethiopia's most attractive towns, you'll have trouble not turning your back on it. Just like us, you'll helplessly gravitate down wide palm-lined boulevards to Lake Tana's gorgeous shore and once there, you'll nary a look over your shoulder.

It's a great place to spend some days. Besides sights around town, you're on the doorstep of Lake Tana's mystical monasteries.

Information

There are several banks and internet cafés, a small **tourist office** (☎ 0582 201686; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) and a telecommunications building for calling home. **Gamby Higher Clinic & Pharmacy** (☎ 0582 202017; ☎ 24hr), on the main drag, is the best medical facility.

Sights & Activities

Though lounging lakeside and watching pelicans skirting the surface might be a relaxing pastime, a more rewarding day is spent exploring Lake Tana's famous **monasteries** (admission to each Birr20 to Birr50) lurking on 20 of its islands. Many date from the late 16th or early 17th century, though some may have been the site of pre-Christian shrines.

Boat operators abound and shifty commission agents lurk everywhere. Negotiated prices (for one to five people) range from Birr120 for a 90-minute trip to Birr1000 for 11 hours in a 40HP speedboat. Ensure your boat has life jackets and spare fuel.

The Blue Nile snakes out of Lake Tana's southern end, plummeting 30km later over the **Blue Nile Falls** (admission Birr15, personal video cameras Birr100; ☎ 7am-5.30pm). Named by locals *Tis Isat* (water that smokes), the once-mighty falls have now withered like an aged chain smoker, thanks to a hydroelectric project. Can you say 'Water with emphysema' in Amharic? Still, it's a pretty picnic spot with many parrots, toucans, white-throated seedeaters and vervet monkeys. Buses (Birr4.20, one bumpy hour) access Tis Abay, a nearby village. The Ghion Hotel arranges tours.

Other interests include Bahir Dar's **market** and a massive new **war memorial**, near the Blue Nile bridge a few kilometres northeast, dedicated to those who died fighting the Derg.

Sleeping

Enkutatash Hotel (☎ 0582 204435; d/tw Birr40/50) Just west of town, this hotel has rooms that sport rugs, mosquito nets, cold-water showers and tiny 'verandas'.

Bahir Dar Hotel (☎ 0582 200788; d with/without bathroom Birr50/40) Behind the telecommunications office, offering simple and clean rooms. Only private showers are hot, and noise rises on weekends.

Ghion Hotel (☎ 0582 200111; ghionbd@ethionet.et; camp site Birr33, d & tw Birr75-125; ☎) Though tired and worn like your favourite travel socks, there's no denying Ghion's lakeside setting is beautiful. Room sizes vary and prices are negotiable. Mosquitos are problematic – bring mozzie nets. It's perfect for campers.

Tana Hotel (☎ 0582 200554; ghion@ethionet.et; s/tw/ste US\$38/50/75; ☎) Lakeside, just north of town, Tana's rooms offer sunset lake views. Rooms are somewhat stylish, with embroidered bedding and satellite TVs.

Papyrus Hotel (☎ 0582 205100; fax 0582 208543; s/d Birr215/269, ste Birr322-537; ☎ ☎) Reasonably sized and well-furnished rooms, complete with mosquito nets. Papyrus lacks Summerland's polished feel, Tana's location, and only suites offer satellite TV.

Summerland Hotel (☎ 0582 206566; www.enjoybahirdar.com; s/d/tw Birr238/361/375) What it lacks in character, Summerland makes up for in comfort and cleanliness. Sparkling tile floors, gleaming bathrooms, satellite TVs, mosquito nets, the odd bit of marble and balconies are all up for grabs.

Eating

Tana Pastry (mains Birr4-12) Good for a pastry or omelette. Locals rate the cheap fresh fish.

Bahir Dar Hotel (mains Birr7-12) For local atmosphere and great Ethiopian fare, nowhere beats this hotel's courtyard. Sit under the stars, enjoy the music (and bonfires on weekends) and dine for pennies.

Did Anbessa Restaurant (mains Birr13-24) A wide-ranging menu, with everything from *minchet abesh* (a thick minced-meat stew) to Hungarian goulash and American meatloaf. The Indian curry was pleasantly surprising.

Drinking & Entertainment

A lakeside drink is as mandatory as it is enjoyable. The garden at **Tana Hotel** (beer Birr10) is tops for sunset views, while **Mango Park** (beer Birr5) is best for local atmosphere.

For something to knock you off your feet, visit the hole-in-the-wall *araki* (grain spirit) bars near the bus station.

If you'd like an entertaining cultural experience with *azmaris* (see boxed text, p662) and a good laugh, visit **Balageru Cultural Club** (admission free, beer Birr6). Brave the dance floor and you'll win lots of friends.

Getting There & Around

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0582 200020) has daily flights to Addis Ababa (US\$78, 30 minutes), Gonder (US\$37, 17 minutes), Lalibela (US\$61, 1½ hours) and Aksum (US\$86, two to three hours).

Two daily buses serve Addis Ababa (via Debre Markos Birr61, 1½ days; via Mota Birr57, 12 hours). There are morning buses to Gonder (Birr23, four hours). Minibuses serve Addis Ababa (Birr120 to Birr150, six hours) and Gonder (Birr30, three hours); ask your hotel.

A ferry sails Sunday for Gorgora (Birr105, 1½ days), on Lake Tana's northern shore. The **Marine Authority office** (☎ 0582 200730; ☒ closed Sun) sells tickets.

Bikes are perfect for exploring; hire one just south of Tana Pastry (Birr3 per hour). An airport taxi costs Birr40.

GONDER

pop 158,000

Friends may not believe that beneath the shadows of 17th-century African castles you slipped into a classic Italian Art Deco café for a *macchiato*. But savouring the surreal experience is what's important. Laden with classical centuries-old stone castles and palaces, it's easy to see how Gonder rightfully earned the moniker 'Africa's Camelot'. It's a great place to spend a few days, and makes a convenient base from which to leap into the Simien Mountains.

Information

Fairly spread out, Gonder is still a great place to navigate on foot. Piazza marks the town centre and it hosts banks, internet cafés, the post office and **Birhan Tesfa Clinic** (☎ 0581 115943; ☒ 24hr), Gonder's best medical facility. Just east of Piazza is the **Tourist information centre** (☎ 0581 110022; amhtour@ethionet.et; ☒ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat), with information and city guides (Birr150 per day).

Sights

It's hard not to notice Gonder's impressive **Royal Enclosure** (admission Birr50, personal video cameras Birr75; ☒ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30pm-5.30pm), with its castles and high stone walls sitting streetside. Constructed piecemeal by successive emperors between the mid-17th and mid-18th centuries, Unesco declared the entire 70,000-sq-metre site a World Heritage site in 1979.

Free 90-minute guided tours (tips are expected) are worthwhile and available weekdays. On weekends, local licensed guides loiter near the gate and charge about Birr30 (post negotiations).

Around 2km northwest lies **Fasiladas' Bath** (admission incl in Royal Enclosure ticket; ☒ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm), a shady, beautiful and historic spot attributed to Emperors Fasiladas (r 1632-67) and Iyasu I (r 1682-1706). Until fully restored (a five-year project financed by Norway for Birr6.4 million) in 2008, we won't call it peaceful, though it's worth visiting.

Head 1.5km further west and explore the underrated **Empress Mentewab's Kuskum Complex** (admission Birr25, personal video cameras Birr75; ☒ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm). It was built in 1730 for the redoubtable Empress Mentewab, upon her husband's death. Although less preserved than the Royal Enclosure, the complex offers an impressive mix of countryside views, each dramatically framed by its crumbling remnants.

Another great sight is the church of **Debre Berhan Selassie** (admission Birr25; ☒ 6am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm), an easy stroll 2km northeast of town. Despite its walls hosting the nation's most vibrant ecclesiastical artwork, it's the ceiling that captures most visitors' imaginations. Think of Mona Lisa's smile and multiply it 104 times!

Sleeping

Fasil Hotel (☎ 0581 110221; d/tw without bathroom Birr50/60) The Italian-feeling, top-floor rooms are huge, bright and airy. The shared showers are hot and usually clean. It's occasionally a little noisy.

Belegez Pension (☎ 0581 114356; s/d Birr70/80, d without bathroom Birr60) Simple smallish rooms surround a paved private courtyard that's perfect for parking your tired truck. Bright, clean rooms with toilets and hot showers offer Ethiopia's best budget-hotel towels – huge and soft! Too bad the pillows are exactly the opposite! Reservations are wise.

Misrak Pension (☎ 0581 110069; d Birr100) Prices here are entirely *faranji*-fied however the rooms are spotless and all have comfortable mattresses.

Fogera Hotel (☎ 0581 110405; s/tw/tr US\$20/25/35) While the rooms in the old Italian building beg for renovations, the comfortable garden *tukuls* (conical thatched huts) have aged well. Each has high ceilings and hot-water showers.

Goha Hotel (☎ 0581 110634; ghion@ethionet.et; s/tw/ste US\$38/50/75) While wall-hangings and embroidered bedding are nice, views from rooms 201 to 209 steal the show. Unquestionably Gonder's top hotel.

Eating

Mini Fogera (mains Birr8-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) The cement stalls won't win your bottom's approval, but the Ethiopian fare may win your stomach's.

Goha Hotel (mains Birr16-23; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Dine on roast lamb, fish cutlet, lentil soup or other Western favourites in Goha's massive, bright dining room.

Habesha Kitfo (mains Birr17-35; ☎ lunch & dinner) A great place for great Ethiopian food, lovingly and traditionally decked out with woven mat floor, cowhide stools and leather chairs. Vegetarian fasting food is available daily.

There are plenty of cafés for quick eats, and the **Ras Dashen Supermarket** (☎ 8am-9pm) is perfect for stocking up on Simien Mountain supplies.

Drinking

To unwind with a drink, nowhere is better than the terrace at **Goha Hotel** (beer Birr7). For cheaper beer and perfectly frothed cappuccinos, slide into the classic Italian **Abyssinia Café** (drinks Birr1.50-4.50). For more action, wade into the well-known **Abkeilish Tej Beat** (bottles of tej Birr5) for some *tej*.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0581 110129) flies once or twice daily to Addis Ababa (US\$102, 1½ to two hours), Bahir Dar (US\$37, 17 minutes), Lalibela (US\$51, 30 minutes) and Aksum (US\$73, 1¼ hours). Taxis to/from the airport cost between Birr30 and Birr40.

Buses serve Addis Ababa (Birr83, two days' duration) and Bahir Dar (Birr22, four hours, three daily); for Aksum, go to Shire first (Birr40.60, 11 hours) on the 6am bus.

SIMIEN MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

No matter how you look at them, the Simien Mountains will leave you speechless. For trekkers, silence is the result of their lungs screaming after slogging up a scree slope for 4200m. For animal-lovers, it's the trepidation of sitting among 100 gelada baboons that zaps their vocabulary. For everyone with a heart-beat, it's simply standing atop a panoramic precipice and overlooking the Abyssinian abyss that takes the breath away.

Be it a two-day stroll to Sankaber, a five-day jaunt to Chenek or ten-day trek to Ras Dashen (4543m), these mountains make a terrific break from the historical-circuit's constant monument-bashing. Besides baboons, the park also hosts a variety of endemic mammals, birds and plants, including the beautiful, massively horned *walia ibex*. Unsurprisingly, the park is a World Heritage Site.

Camping equipment, guides, mandatory scouts, cooks, mules and mule-handlers are all easily arranged at **park headquarters** (☎ 0581 113482; admission Birr50, camp site Birr20, 5-seat vehicle Birr10; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon & 2-5pm Sat & Sun) in Debark. Note that all park fees cover 48 hours. All in, including food and rented camping and cooking equipment, Birr170 per person per day (in a group of two) should suffice.

While in Debark, sleep and eat at the **Simien Park Hotel** (☎ 0581 113481; tw Birr70, s/d/tw without bathroom Birr30/40/50). For a treat on the mountains, try the new luxury ecofriendly **Simien Lodge** (☎ 0116 189398, 0911 203937; www.simiens.com; dm US\$15-20, d US\$95-105, 4-person VIP tukul US\$135-150) at Buyit Ras.

Two morning buses run between Debark and Gonder (Birr14, 3½ hours). For Shire (and Aksum) head to Gonder and hope the Gonder-Shire bus has an empty seat (Birr35, 7½ hours).

If you have limited time, 4WDs can be arranged in Gonder to drop you off at Debark (Birr450, two hours), Sankaber (Birr850, 3½ hours) or Chenek (Birr1000, five hours).

AKSUM

pop 41,500

Sprawling, dusty, and rural – Aksum is modest almost to a fault. Initially, it's hard to imagine that it was ever the site of a great civilisation. Yet Aksum is one of Ethiopia's stars. Littered with massive teetering stelae, ruined palaces, underground tombs (most

undiscovered) and inscriptions rivalling the Rosetta Stone itself, the town once formed part of the Aksumite kingdom described as 'the last of the great civilisations of Antiquity to be revealed to modern knowledge'. It's undoubtedly one of sub-Saharan Africa's most important and spectacular ancient sites, and Unesco lists Aksum as a World Heritage site.

Aksum has a vibrancy, life and continuing national importance very rarely found at ancient sites. Pilgrims still journey to Aksum, and most Ethiopians believe passionately that the Ark of the Covenant resides here.

To do Aksum justice, schedule a bare minimum of two days, or one full day with a vehicle.

Information

Along the two main streets you'll find several banks, health clinics and internet cafés, along with a post office, telecommunications office and the very helpful **Tigrai Tourism Commission** (☎ 0347 753924; ☒ 8am-noon & 1-5pm).

Sights

One admission ticket (adult/student Birr50/25) lasts the duration of your stay, covering all sights within Aksum's immediate vicinity, except the St Mary of Zion church compound. Tickets and guides are available at the Tigrai Tourism Commission.

Ancient Aksum obelisks (stelae) pepper the area, and looking down on a small specimen or staring up at a grand tower, you'll be bowled over. The **Northern stelae field** is grandest, with over 120 stelae ranging from 1m to 33m. Beneath the rising monoliths are a series of tombs; 98% remain undiscovered. A new museum is planned here.

Immediately southwest are the **St Mary of Zion Churches** (admission Birr60, personal video cameras Birr100; ☒ 8am-noon & 2-6pm), Ethiopia's holiest shrine. The rectangular **old church** was built on the site of a 4th-century Aksumite church by Emperor Fasiladas, Gondar's founder, in 1665. A carefully guarded chapel nearby reportedly contains the **Ark of the Covenant**. Don't try to peek, many unfortunate onlookers have 'burst into fire' upon approach!

On a small hill 1.8km northeast of the Northern stelae field, offering views of Adwa's distant jagged mountains, are the monumental 6th-century **Tombs of Kings Kaleb and Gebre Meskel**. En route, you will pass by **King Ezana's**

Inscription, hiding in a timber shack. Dating to the 4th century, it's the Ethiopian equivalent of the Rosetta Stone, a pillar inscribed in Sabaeen, Greek and Ge'ez (the ancestor of Amharic).

Other important sites roundabout include **King Bazen's Tomb** and the remains of a 6th- or 7th-century **palace**, wrongly attributed to Queen Sheba. Rewarding side trips include the ruins of **Yeha**, **Debre Damo monastery** and the **rock-hewn churches of Tigray** – enquire at Tigrai Tourism.

Festivals & Events

On 30 November thousands of pilgrims flood into Aksum to celebrate Mary during the **Festival of Maryam Zion**. Expect a cornucopia of music and dance.

Sleeping

Africa Hotel (☎ 0347 753700; africaho@ethionet.et; d/tw Birr50/70, d without bathroom Birr30; ☑) Rooms are simple and bright enough, with soft beds and very clean private bathrooms.

Kaleb Hotel (☎ 0347 752222; d/tw Birr50/70, s without bathroom Birr30) Flanking a quiet garden courtyard, rooms here are large and quite pleasant, though the bathrooms are aging.

Yeha Hotel (☎ 0347 752378; ghion@ethionet.et; s/d/st U\$38/50/75) The comfortable rooms are cosy, containing satellite TVs. Rooms 127 to 133 and 226 and suites 228, 230 and 232 offer sunset views over town.

Remhai Hotel (☎ 0347 751501; www.remhai-hotel.com; s Birr128-305, d Birr170-395, ste Birr475; ☑ ☒) Zero character, though squeaky clean and full of extras. Nonguests can patrol the pool for Birr15.

Other options:

Abinet Hotel (☎ 0357 753857; d/tw Birr50/100, d without bathroom Birr30)

Lalibela Hotel (☎ 0347 753541; d without bathroom Birr20)

Eating

Ask locals for the best place to eat, and they'll say the **Remhai Hotel** (mains Birr13-28; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner). Ask them where they like to eat, and they'll say the **Abinet Hotel** (mains Birr12-17; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner). Both do decent *faranji* and Ethiopian fare. Another favourite for local meals is **Tsega Cafe & Restaurant** (mains Birr3-10; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner). For après-meal coffee or pastry, visit **Axumawit Pastery** (cakes Birr2) below Abinet.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0347 752300) flies daily to Addis Ababa (US\$131, three hours) via Lalibela (US\$72, 40 minutes), Gonder (US\$73, two hours) and Bahir Dar (US\$86, 2½ hours). Airport taxis cost Birr40; Birr10 if 'shared'.

Go to Shire (Birr10, 1½ hours), for buses to Gonder and Debark (Simien Mountains). Regular buses cover Adwa (Birr5, 45 minutes), Adigrat (Birr20 to Birr25, five hours) and Mekele (Birr35, 8½ hours).

DANAKIL DEPRESSION

Farwell earth, hello to Venus! With several points 100m below sea level, the Danakil Depression has a reputation as one of earth's most inhospitable places. Temperatures can hit 50°C, and with its underlying continental crust pulled thin (as part of the rift system), it's peppered with countless colourful sulphurous springs and an astonishing 25% of Africa's active volcanoes.

Irta'ale (613m), the most famous volcano, has been continuously erupting since 1967. Its small southerly crater holds the planet's only permanent lava lake.

An excursion into this harsh and astounding world isn't something everyone can handle. It is, however, something nobody will ever forget. It's best at its coolest (December to February).

Organise trips through travel agents in Addis Ababa (p657) or through **G.K. Ahadu Tours & Travel Agency** (☎ 0344 406466; gkahadu@ethionet.et) in Mekele. Treat journeys here as serious expeditions: the unprepared have perished in hours.

LALIBELA

pop 8500

An ancient world, including 11 magnificent, medieval, rock-hewn churches, dimly lit passageways, hidden crypts and grottoes, was carved into the red volcanic rock underlying this remote Ethiopian town almost a millennia ago by the Zagwe dynasty. Today that world remains, frozen in stone.

Lalibela, a World Heritage site, undoubtedly ranks among the greatest religious-historical sites in the Christian world.

Information

Facilities are limited to a post office, telecommunications office, **health centre** (☎ 0333 360416; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm), helpful **tourism office**

(☎ 0333 360167; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri) and a few internet cafés. There are no banks.

Sights

Lalibela's **rock-hewn churches** (admission Birr100, personal video cameras Birr150; ☎ 8am-5.30pm) astound for three main reasons: many are not carved into the rock, but freed entirely from it (unlike most of Petra); the buildings are so refined; and so many exist within such a small area. Descend into tunnels, and pass traditional priests and monks floating through the confines like clouds of incense, smell beeswax candles and hear chanting within the deep, cool recesses, only to find yourself standing in the sunlight, slack-jawed staring up at a structure that defies reason.

Although visiting without a guide is possible – getting lost in the warren of tunnels is quite memorable and usually not permanent – you'll miss many of the amazing subtleties each church has to offer. The tourism office has licensed guides (Birr150 per day).

For insight into Highlander life, contact the local charity **Tourism in Ethiopia for Sustainable Future Alternatives** (TESFA; ☎ 0111 140583; www.comunity-tourism-ethiopia.com), which offers rewarding treks south of Lalibela.

Sleeping

Ashton Hotel (☎ 0333 360030; tw Birr100, s without bathroom Birr50) Though aging, the clean twin rooms, with whitewashed walls, local art and embroidered bedding, have more character than any other budget option.

Heaven Guest House (☎ 0333 360075; s/tw US\$10/15, tw without bathroom US\$10) This new place is very clean, and the friendly owner is keen to keep it that way. Wood ceilings overlook shiny linoleum 'wood' floors and sturdy, comfortable beds.

Seven Olives Hotel (☎ 0333 360020; s/d US\$15/27.50) Now privately run, prices have dropped US\$10 despite quality improving. The old-ish, large rooms and bathrooms have comfy new beds.

Roha Hotel (☎ 0333 360009; ghion@ethionet.et; camp site per 2-person tent US\$12.50, s/d/ste US\$38/50/75) A hike in the architectural beauty department, it's a lovely option with great facilities. Rooms 220 to 229 have sunset views. Campers can access hot showers.

Other options:

Lalibela Hotel (☎ 0333 360036; s/tw Birr50/100)

Blue Lal Hotel (☎ 0333 360380; d & tw Birr120-150)

Tukol Village (☎ 0333 360564; camp site per tent US\$4, s/d US\$20/30)

Lal Hotel (☎ 0333 360008; laltour@ethionet.et; camp site Birr60, s/d US\$30/36)

Eating & Drinking

Unique Restaurant (mains Birr4-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the Asheton Hotel, this dark, understated little restaurant, serving cheap tasty Ethiopian dishes, has rave reviews from several readers.

John Cafeteria & Lalibela Restaurant (mains Birr7-16; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) These neighbours share a kitchen and menu. Birr10 lands you an omelette with toast, local honey and a steaming *macchiato*.

Seven Olives Hotel (mains Birr16-32; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An Ethiopian chef with American experience was training staff to go beyond usual *faranji* fare when we stayed here. The terrace makes a good spot for a cold sunset drink.

Askaleh Tej House (flask of tej Birr5) 'Torpedo' serves *tej* of varying potency. There's usually traditional music after 7pm.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0333 360046) flies daily to Addis Ababa (US\$102, 2½ hours), Gondar (US\$51, 30 minutes), Bahir Dar (US\$61, 1½ hours) and Aksum (US\$72, 40 minutes). Most midrange hotels offer airport transfers (Birr25 to Birr30 one way).

Overland, the best approach is currently from Woldia via Gashema. Two buses depart Lalibela daily at 6am heading for Woldia (Birr25, five to seven hours), with one continuing to Addis Ababa (Birr75, two days) after overnighting in Dessie (Birr39, 8½ to 10 hours).

EASTERN ETHIOPIA

DIRE DAWA

pop 260,000

Ethiopia's second-most populous town, Dire Dawa always elicits strong reactions. Some travellers rave about its remarkably spacious and orderly layout (a rarity in Ethiopia), its tree-lined streets, neat squares and colonial buildings, while others think it's utilitarian and self-contained.

Sure, Dire Dawa lacks Harar's charisma, but if you don't dismiss it you'll discover it

has its fair share of beguiling sights and some inviting quarters.

With Babel-like ambience, the enormous **Kafira Market**, in Megala, is the town's most striking sight. Attracting Afar herders, Somali pastoralists, Oromo farmers and, sometimes around dawn, large camel caravans from the Somali desert.

If you are staying on, **Mekonen Hotel** (☎ 0251 113348; Kezira; r without bathroom Birr40), housed in an old Italian colonial building opposite the train station, features some rooms with plenty of space and some with balconies overlooking the square. The shared bathrooms (with cold showers) can be slightly on the scummy side. A minor trek from the town centre, **Tsehay Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 0251 110023; Kezira; r Birr60) features cleanish rooms around pleasant, hedged gardens. When we stayed, the plumbing seemed to be on agony's brink but was still functioning. Its best asset is the onsite restaurant.

Paradiso Restaurant (☎ 0251 113780; Kezira; mains Birr15-20; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is the town's most respected restaurant. Its menu roves from palatable Italian to traditional gutbusters, such as *kitfo* (uncooked minced beef or lamb in butter, *berbere* and sometimes thyme).

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines (☎ 0251 113069; Kezira) flies daily between Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa (US\$99, one hour). Four flights per week serve Jijiga (US\$55, 15 minutes).

Daily buses serve Addis Ababa (Birr54, 12 hours) via Awash (Birr43, nine hours), while copious minibuses go to Harar (Birr10, one hour).

HARAR

pop 91,000

Harar is a place apart. Located south of the Chercher Mountains, this sensational city will blast your senses. The **old walled city**, with 368 alleyways squeezed into just 1 sq km, 87 mosques and shrines, coffee scents wafting through the streets, animated markets, superb architecture, charming people and unique ambience, will make you feel like you're floating through another time and space. As if that's not enough, an otherworldly ritual takes place nightly outside the walls: men feeding hyenas. Don't be confused: it's not a touristy show, it's a tradition.

A bit like Zanzibar, Harar appeals to spiritual seekers and hedonists. Despite shortcomings (read: poverty and minor hassles), you'll fall in love with this gem of a city – at least we did.

Information

There are several internet cafés and a Commercial Bank near Harar Gate. The **tourist office** (☎ 0256 661763; new town; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–5.30pm Mon–Fri) sits within the Harari People National Regional State Trade & Industry building in the new town.

Sleeping

Most commendable places are outside the old town.

Tewodros Hotel (☎ 0256 660217; new town; d Birr50–70) Room with a hyena view... No joke! At night, from rooms 15, 16, 117 and 18, you'll watch hyenas rummaging behind the hotel. Oh, rooms are tidy and some have hot showers. Avoid the grotty rooms downstairs. It's a wee walk from Harar Gate.

Belayneh Hotel (☎ 0256 662030; fax 0256 666222; new town; s/d Birr115/138) A popular place near the bus station. A little mundane, it nonetheless offers sizable rooms with bathrooms that won't have you squirming. If you snaffle a room with a Christian market view, how can you complain?

Rewda Guesthouse (☎ 0256 662211; old town; r with shared bathroom incl breakfast Birr200–300) Enter at your own risk: you may never leave again! This cocoonlike guesthouse occupies an old Harari house in the absolute heart of the old town (ask somebody to guide you). Rest your head in one of the two well-kept rooms, and marvel at the thoughtfully decorated common areas. Throw in Rewda's warm welcome and you have a winner. Reservations are crucial.

Eating

Rose Cafe & Restaurant (new town; mains Birr10–15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The closest thing Harar has to a hip café. Munch on various snacks, including pasta and burgers, or start the day with an omelette or scrambled eggs. There's also bait for the sweet-toothed. Pretty-in-pink waitresses complete this very rosy picture.

Hirut Restaurant (☎ 0256 660419; new town; mains Birr15–25; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A cheery, authentic place to savour Ethiopian dishes, pasta and various grills. Sink into a super-filling

kwanta firfir (dried strips of beef in chilli and *berbere*) and knock it down with some Gouder wine, if you're game. Service was a tad amateurish the day we ate.

Rewda Café (new town) Drool over the devilish display of cakes and pastries in this sleek venture. It's also good for breakfast, with good choices of eggs and sandwiches.

Ice Cream Mermaid (old town) A peaceful refuge from the crowded strip nearby, this hole-in-the-wall joint concocts flavoursome ice creams and filling cakes. If you need a vitamin fix, it prepares refreshing fruit juices.

Drinking

If you're pining for a good, fresh beer, Harar is seventh heaven. There's a smattering of buzzing watering holes, like **Samsun Hotel** (old town) and **GC Pub** (old town), which both sit near Harar Gate. If you feel like everlasting memories of Harari coffee – hailed as one of the world's best – try **Ali Bal Cafe** (Feres Magala) in old town's core.

Entertainment

National Hotel (new town) Hallelujah! Live music Thursday to Sunday from 9.30pm to 2am or 3am. It's a mixture of Ethiopian/Middle Eastern pop, with traditional tunes thrown in. When not playing, there's soccer on a big-screen TV – much less exotic.

Shopping

Nure Roasted Harar Coffee (☎ 0256 663136; ☎ Mon–Sat) Just thinking about the scents wafting from this place makes us swoon. One step inside, and you're hooked forever (1kg packets cost Birr45).

In some of the old town's Adare houses, souvenir shops display beautifully made baskets, and silver and amber jewellery. Remember to bargain!

Getting There & Around

All transport leaves from the bus station near Harar Gate. Bountiful minibuses link to Dire Dawa (Birr10, one hour). Seven daily buses serve Jijiga (Birr13, 2½ to three hours) via Babil (Birr8, 45 minutes), while two access Addis Ababa (Birr55, one day). Buy tickets a day early. Several minibuses also serve Addis Ababa (Birr100, nine to 10 hours) – ask at your hotel.

Shared/contract taxis cost Birr1/5 for short hops.

SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

RIFT VALLEY LAKES

Africa's renowned Rift Valley cuts through the south, and hosts lakes, astounding birdlife and national parks.

Less than 180km from Addis Ababa is a cluster of four Rift Valley lakes: **Lake Ziway**, **Lake Abiata**, **Lake Shala** and **Lake Langano**. While they're all known as havens for bird-watching, only Lake Langano has the double benefit of being safe for swimming (bilharzia and crocodile free). The volcanic Lake Shala, part of **Lake Abiata-Shala National Park** (admission per 48hr Birr50), is easily the most attractive, with trails leading to lookouts.

Awasa, southern Ethiopia's largest city, is 100km further south and sits on the shores of attractive **Lake Awasa**. With plenty of facilities, a great **fish market** and row boats to boot, Awasa is a great place to stop.

The wildest and most attractive of southern Ethiopia's lakes must be **Lake Abaya** and **Lake Chamo**. They are ringed by savannah plains, loaded with crocodiles and divided by the 'Bridge of God', which hosts Ethiopia's best safari opportunity, **Nechisar National Park** (admission Birr70, vehicle Birr20), as well as the infamous **crocodile market**.

Sleeping & Eating

LAKE LANGANO

Bekele Mola Hotel (☎ 0981 190011, 0911 486014; camp site Birr33, 1-1/2-/3-bedroom bungalows Birr208/276/346) Unlike Bishangari's seclusion, accommodation is densely packed along the lake's southwestern shore. Rooms at Bekele Mola are old and simple, yet clean and sport mosquito nets. The restaurant (mains Birr33 to Birr45) serves up delicious tilapia (a freshwater fish).

Bishangari Lodge (☎ 0115 517533, 0911 201317; www.bishangari.com; s/tw US\$52/92, s/tw without bathroom US\$32/57, ste US\$63-109) Hyped as Ethiopia's first ecolodge, Bishangari is an amazing and comfortable place to stay. Rates listed include breakfast (an extra US\$20 per person will include a lovely lunch and dinner).

AWASA

Adenium Campsite (☎ 0462 212787; kuratujana@yahoo.de; camp site Birr20, tw with shared bathroom Birr60) Adenium is potentially Ethiopia's best budget accommodation and camp

site. Although there are currently only two rooms, they're a haven of simplicity and artsy elegance. Cheaper huts in the flowering garden are coming soon. Meals are insanely delicious.

Gebrekiristos Hotel (☎ 046 202780; d Birr63-76, tw Birr79) The Birr76 doubles are big, bright and boast balconies, satellite TVs, telephones, fridges and mozzie nets – angle for rooms 317 or 217.

ARBA MINCH

Arba Minch Tourist Hotel (☎ 0468 812171; fax 0468 813661; s Birr150, d Birr170-200) Lacking views and charging *faranjis* double, they distract you with spotless, modern rooms boasting satellite TVs, bright windows and quality furnishings. Facilities, including a pizza restaurant and juice bar, are everywhere.

Swayne's Hotel (☎ 0468 811895; www.swayneshotel.com; camp site Birr50, s/tw Birr200/250) Woven Dorze huts envelop half the bungalows and give it a quirky, yet traditional feel. Colourful local artwork hangs from the modern rooms' walls, hand-carved wooden furniture sits on spotless floors and colourful lamps shine light on it all. Rooms 4 to 22 boast stunning lake views. The restaurant prepares the best Western fare in town.

Lemlem Hotel (mains Birr7-16) Sit under the trees and devour the best Ethiopian food in Arba Minch.

Getting There & Away

Ethiopian Airlines links Addis Ababa and Arba Minch (US\$81, 2½ hours).

Buses connect Addis Ababa with Lake Ziway (Birr17, three hours, three daily), Awasa (Birr28, 5½ hours, five daily), Lake Langano (jump off the Awasa-bound bus) and Arba Minch (Birr52, 12 hours).

LOWER OMO VALLEY

Hosting some of Africa's most fascinating and colourful ethnic groups, along with Ethiopia's worst roads, a trip to the country's remote southwest corner is as captivating as it is uncomfortable.

The landscape is diverse, ranging from dry, open savannah plains to riverine forests bordering the Omo and Mago Rivers. The vast Omo River meanders for nearly 1000km, eventually bisecting Ethiopia's largest, wildest and most inaccessible national parks: **Omo** and **Mago**.

It's here that ancient customs and traditions have remained almost entirely intact. Animism is still the religion, and some still practise a purely pastoral economy. Whether it's watching the Hamar people's Jumping of the Bulls ceremony or witnessing the Mursi's mystical stick fights and mind-blowing lip plates, your visit here will stick with you for a lifetime.

A good itinerary begins in Konso and takes you through the villages of **Weyto**, **Arbore**, **Turmi**, **Omorate**, **Dimeka** and **Key Afar**, before finishing at Jinka.

Jinka has decent facilities and most villages have some basic accommodation.

Ethiopian Airlines has flights linking Addis Ababa with Jinka (US\$94, 2½ hours). Buses also run between the two cities (Birr85, two days). To get around, you'll have to hitch on local trucks or hire a 4WD.

BALE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

More than any other park, Bale Mountains National Park is known for wildlife. Over 60 mammal species and 260 bird species have been recorded here, including dozens of endemic species.

As you approach from Shashemene, eastern ridges are punctuated with fortresslike escarpments, while northern ones are gentler; their rounded rock pinnacles dotting the ridges like worn teeth protruding from an old man's gums. Within the park, rivers cut deep gorges, alpine lakes feed streams, and water accepts gravity's fate at several waterfalls. In the lower hills, Highlanders canter along century-old paths on their richly caparisoned horses, and the noise of shepherds cracking their whips echoes around the valley.

You can arrange one- to six-day treks at park headquarters in Dinsho, though you'll need your own equipment. Park fees are similar to Simien Mountains (p666).

From Addis Ababa, catch a bus to Robe (Birr48, 12 hours) and leap off in Dinsho.

ETHIOPIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Finding accommodation in Ethiopia is easy. Finding accommodation that won't curl your toes is tiring work – thankfully we've done most of that!

Budget options (US\$1 to US\$20 per night), with spartan rooms and shared toilets, domi-

PRACTICALITIES

- The best-known English-language newspapers are the *Ethiopian Herald* and the privately-owned *Monitor*.
- Radio Ethiopia broadcasts in English weekday afternoons and evenings.
- Ethiopia's ETV1 channel broadcasts in English from 10.30pm to midnight. Many hotels' and restaurants' satellite TVs receive BBC or CNN.
- Electricity supply is 220V. Sockets vary from European continental two-pin to South African/Indian-style with two circular metal pins above a large circular grounding pin.
- Ethiopia uses the metric system.

nate. Only major cities provide midrange options (US\$20 to US\$50), which are usually clean and quiet, but run-down. True top-end picks (US\$50 and up) are limited to Addis Ababa. Ethiopians call rooms with a double bed 'singles' and rooms with twin beds 'doubles'. We use typical Western interpretations in our reviews.

Outside of national parks there are few camp sites. Some hotels allow camping, though it's not much cheaper than decent rooms.

ACTIVITIES

With two gorgeous 4000m mountain ranges and countless other peaks hosting unique wildlife, it's little wonder that trekking is a major activity. There's also plenty of rock-climbing potential. The waterways churning through Ethiopia's topographic delights host fine rafting and fishing. Lastly, Ethiopia's plethora of endemic and migratory birds makes it a world-class birding destination.

BOOKS

Donald N Levine's imaginative *Wax & Gold* provides outstanding insight into Amharic culture, though chapter six is rather far-fetched!

Graham Hancock's *The Sign and the Seal* delves into one of the greatest mysteries of all time: the bizarre 'disappearance' of the Ark of the Covenant.

In *Prester Quest*, Nicholas Jubber entertains intriguing voyages from Venice to Ethiopia on his

quest to deliver – albeit 824 years late – Pope Alexander III's famed letter to Prester John, the mythical Christian king of the East.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks, post offices and telecommunications offices are open at least 8.30am to 11am and 1.30pm to 3.30pm weekdays and 8.30am to 11am Saturday. Government offices' hours are 8.30am to 12.30pm (to 11.30am Friday) and 1.30pm to 5.30pm Monday to Friday. Shop hours are 8.30am to 1.30pm and 2.30pm to 5.30pm weekdays.

CUSTOMS

There's no limit on foreign currency entering Ethiopia, but no more than Birr100 can be exported and imported. If you're bringing valuable items, like video cameras or laptop computers, you may have to register it on your passport at immigration.

Leaving with anything deemed historical is illegal.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Compared with many African countries, violent crime is rare; against travellers it's extremely rare. Petty theft is common in Addis Ababa, but is less common elsewhere.

Since the controversial 2005 elections, there have been isolated occasions of violent clashes and minor bombings in Addis Ababa. Check your government's travel advisories for up-to-date security reports. Due to continued security issues around Gambella in western Ethiopia, the area should be avoided by tourists. The same can be said for Ethiopia's border areas with Somalia.

In the annoyances department, Ethiopia has oodles of beggars, and travellers often resent being 'targeted' – follow locals' lead and give coins to disabled, ill, elderly and blind persons. If not, say *igzabier yisteh/yistesh* (m/f; God bless you) with a slight bow of the head. Never give to children, whether it be money, sweets, pens, empty water bottles or food.

Self-appointed guides can be annoying. Be polite but firm.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Ethiopian Embassies & Consulates

In Africa, Ethiopia has embassies in Djibouti (p630), Egypt (p121), Kenya (p710), Sudan (p210) and Uganda (p819).

Embassies elsewhere include the following:

Australia (☎ 03-9417 3419; www.consul.com.au/index.html; 38 Johnston Street, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065)

Canada (☎ 613-235 6637; Suite 210, 151 Slater St, Ottawa, K1P 5H3)

France (☎ 01 47 83 83 95; embeth@starnet.fr; 35 Ave Charles Floquet, 75007, Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-772 060; Boothstr 20a, 12207, Berlin)

Ireland (☎ 01-677 7062; info@ethiopianembassy.ie; 1-3 Merrion House, Fitzwilliam St Lower, Dublin 2)

Italy (☎ 06 440 36 53; embethrm@rdn.it; 16-18 Via Andrea Vesalio, 00161, Rome)

UK (☎ 020-7589 7212; 17 Prince's Gate, London, SW7 1PZ)

USA (☎ 202-364 1200; info@ethiopianembassy.org; 3506 International Drive, NW Washington DC 20008)

Embassies & Consulates in Ethiopia

Embassies and consulates in Addis Ababa include the following:

Belgium (☎ 0116 611643; embel.et@ethionet.et; Fikremariam Abatechan St)

Canada (☎ 0113 713022; addis@dfait-maeci.gc.ca; Seychelles St) Also represents Australia.

Djibouti (☎ 0116 613006; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Off Bole Rd.

Egypt (☎ 0111 553077; egyptian.emb@ethionet.et; Madagascar St)

Eritrea (☎ 0115 512844; Ras Mekonen Ave) Currently closed.

France (☎ 0111 550066; amba.france@ethionet.et)

Germany (☎ 0111 550433; german.emb.addis@ethionet.et)

Italy (☎ 0111 553042; italembadd@ethionet.et)

Kenya (☎ 0116 610033; kenigad@ethionet.et; Fikremariam Abatechan St; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

Netherlands (☎ 0113 711100; netherlands.emb@ethionet.et) It's off Ring Rd.

Somaliiland (☎ 0116 635921; btwn Bole Rd & Cameron St; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-3.30pm Mon-Fri)

Sudan (☎ 0115 516477; sudan.embassy@ethionet.et; Ras Lulseged St; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri)

UK (☎ 0116 612354; britishembassy.addisababa@fco.gov.uk; Fikremariam Abatechan St)

USA (☎ 0115 174000; <http://addisababa.usembassy.gov>; Algeria St)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Religious festivals, particularly Orthodox, are colourful events with pageantry, music and dancing. The most outstanding include the following:

Leddēt (also known as Genna or Christmas) 6-7 January

Timkat (Epiphany, celebrating Christ's baptism) 19 January

Kiddus Yohannes (New Year's Day) 11 September

Meskel (Finding of the True Cross) 27 September

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays can be divided into three categories: national secular holidays, Christian Orthodox festivals (p673) and Islamic holidays (p1106).

National secular holidays include:

Victory of Adwa Commemoration Day 2 March

International Labour Day 1 May

Ethiopian Patriots' Victory Day (also known as 'Liberation Day') 5 May

Downfall of the Derg 28 May

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet in Ethiopia is like a pimple on your wedding day – it's always found where everyone looks and never where nobody can see. In English? Internet is everywhere in Addis, pretty easy to spot in major towns and nonexistent in places that see few tourists.

Connections are slow and usually cost Birr0.20 to Birr0.30 per minute.

MAPS

The most up-to-date Ethiopia map is produced by International Travel Maps (1998; 1:2,000,000).

MONEY

Ethiopia's currency is the birr.

US dollars are the best currency to carry, both in cash and travellers cheques, though euros are gaining popularity. You'll have no trouble exchanging cash or travellers cheques in most cities. There are no ATMs that accept foreign cards, and credit-card advances are only a costly possibility in Addis Ababa. Credit cards are accepted (with hefty commissions) at a few hotels in Addis Ababa, and airline offices.

Converting birr to US dollars or euros can only be done for people holding exchange receipts and onward air tickets from Ethiopia – overlanders need to budget accordingly.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Many Ethiopians feel seriously threatened or compromised when cameras are pointed at them. Always ask permission, even if it's only using basic sign language. In other areas, like the Lower Omo Valley, you'll be chased by people demanding to have their photo taken! However, this eagerness relates to the

fee they'll claim for each photo (Birr1 to Birr2 per person per picture). Always agree to an amount first.

POST

Ethiopia's postal system is reliable and reasonably efficient. Airmail costs Birr2 for postcards; Birr2 for a letter up to 20g to Africa, Birr2.45 to Europe and the Middle East, and Birr3.45 to the Americas, Australia and Asia.

International parcels can only be sent from the Addis Ababa's main post office.

SHOPPING

Addis Ababa is the shopping haven, though most villages' markets possess latent treasures. Traditional arts and crafts include basketware, paintings, musical instruments, pottery, hornwork, leatherwork and woodcarving.

Other crafts include metalwork (materials range from gold to iron) as well as weaving. Remember, exporting anything deemed historical is illegal.

TELEPHONE

Telecommunications offices, located in almost every town, charge Birr50.50 for the first three minutes of international calls and Birr10 for each minute after (plus 15% tax). Countless shops also operate as 'telecentres', quickly connecting you anywhere worldwide for Birr15 to Birr25 per minute.

TIME

Time is expressed so insanely in Ethiopia that it blows travellers' minds! At sunrise it's 12 o'clock (6am our time) and after one hour of sunshine it's 1 o'clock. After two hours of sunshine? Yes, 2 o'clock. The sun sets at 12 o'clock (6pm our time) and after one hour of darkness it's...1 o'clock! When being quoted a time, always ask, *Be habesha/faranji akotater no?* – Is that Ethiopian/foreigner's time?

TOURIST INFORMATION

There's a helpful government tourist information office in Addis Ababa. Independent offices can be found in regional capitals. No national tourist office exists abroad.

VISAS

Nationals of 33 countries receive one-month visas (US\$20) at Bole International Airport. These include USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and most of Europe.

Ethiopian embassies abroad charge up to US\$63 for visas, and usually require an onward air ticket (or a visa for the next country you're visiting), a yellow-fever vaccination certificate and proof of sufficient funds. African Ethiopian embassies are less strict.

Visa Extensions

Visas can be extended to a maximum of three months in Addis Ababa at the **Department of Immigration** (☎ 0111 553899). It takes 24 hours and costs US\$20.

Visas for Onward Travel

DJIBOUTI

The embassy requires US\$30 and two photos. It's usually a same day service.

KENYA

Three-month visas cost US\$50 (or Birr438) and require one photo. Apply in the morning and pick up the following afternoon. Visas are also easily obtained at the Moyale crossing and Nairobi's airport.

SOMALILAND

Visas require US\$40 and one passport photo. It takes 24 hours to process. You must call ahead. While Somaliland is proving accessible to intrepid travellers, the recent outbreak of war between Ethiopia and the Islamic militia in Somalia makes Somalia a strict no-go area.

SUDAN

Obtaining a visa can take ages (or simply prove impossible). A letter of introduction from your embassy may help. Visas cost US\$61 and require one photo.

TRANSPORT IN ETHIOPIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Addis Ababa's **Bole International Airport** (code ADD) is the only international airport in Ethiopia. Airline offices in Addis Ababa include the following:

British Airways (BA; ☎ 0115 505913; www.ba.com; Hilton Hotel, Menelik II Ave) Hub: London.

Daallo Airlines (D3; ☎ 0115 534688; www.daallo.com; Bole Rd) Hub: Djibouti City.

Djibouti Airlines (D8; ☎ 0116 633702; fax 0116 614769; Rwanda St) Hub: Djibouti City.

EgyptAir (MS; ☎ 0111 564493; www.egyptair.com.eg; Churchill Ave) Hub: Cairo.

Kenya Airways (KQ; ☎ 0115 525548; www.kenya-airways.com; Hilton Hotel, Menelik II Ave) Hub: Nairobi.

KLM (KL; ☎ 0115 525541; www.klm.com; Hilton Hotel, Menelik II Ave; ☎) Hub: Amsterdam.

Lufthansa (LH; ☎ 0111 551666; www.lufthansa.com; Gambia St) Hub: Frankfurt.

Saudi Arabian Airlines (SV; ☎ 0115 512637; www.saudiairlines.com; Ras Desta Damtew St) Hub: Jeddah.

Sudan Airways (SD; ☎ 0115 504724; www.sudanair.com; sudanair@ethionet.et; Ras Desta Damtew St) Hub: Khartoum.

Yemenia (IY; ☎ 0115 526441; www.yememia.com; Ras Desta Damtew St) Hub: Sanaa.

Land

DJIBOUTI

Border formalities are usually pretty painless. There are two current land routes: one via Dire Dawa and Gelille, and one via Awash and Galafi.

Shirkada Gaadidka Dadweynaha Ee Yaryar Dhexe Iyo Xamuulkaa (☎ 0251 118455) buses depart Dire Dawa daily for Djibouti City (Birr120, 11 hours). An unreliable, dilapidated old train is supposed to run this route every second day (Birr80).

Although further, the Awash/Galafi crossing is best for those driving, as it's entirely sealed.

ERITREA

The Eritrea-Ethiopia border remains closed. Detour through Djibouti.

KENYA

The most-used crossing is at Moyale, 772km south of Addis Ababa. Daily Ethiopian buses link Addis and Moyale (Birr79, 1½ days), while Kenyan versions connect the border to Marsabit (KSh600, 8½ hours) and Isiolo (KSh1200, 17 hours) along a bone-jarring dirt road. Trucks also serve the Kenyan side. Banditry has been reduced significantly in northern Kenya, though always check the latest.

With a serious 4WD and Kenyan visas acquired in Addis, there's an adventurous crossing accessing Lake Turkana via the Lower Omo Valley. Get stamped out in Omorate, before attempting the day-long drive to Koobi Fora research base at Kenya's Sibiloi National Park. There's no Kenyan border post, so you must

wait to get stamped in at Nairobi. Since getting stamped out of Kenya isn't an option here, this route is only for those travelling south.

SOMALILAND

Daily buses run between Jijiga and Wajaale at the border (Birr15, 1½ to two hours). After immigration procedures, you'll find contract taxis (Birr300) and minibuses (Birr40) to Har-ga, Somaliland's capital.

SUDAN

The only open Sudan crossing is Metema/Galabat, 180km west of Gonder. To reach Metema from Gonder, take a new direct bus (Birr31, seven hours) or take the one to Shihedi (Birr23, five to six hours), where pick-up trucks (Birr8) cover the last 40km to Metema. Cross on foot before hopping on a truck in Gallabat to Gedaref (Dinar1500, five to six hours).

GETTING AROUND

Air

Ethiopian Airlines (www.flyethiopian.com) is the domestic carrier, regularly serving all major cities (see relevant cities for details). These reasonably priced (and scenic!) flights are worth considering, some cutting days on the road.

In Ethiopia standard rates always apply, whether buying tickets months or hours in advance. It's absolutely essential to reconfirm all flights.

Bus

A good network of buses slowly connects most towns. Unlike most African countries, seated passengers in the aisles of long-distance buses are illegal, making them more comfortable (we said more comfortable, not comfortable!) and safer. They're cheap, 100km costing Birr12 to Birr25.

Distances are the biggest problem. Northern Ethiopia's historical circuit requires around 10 days of bus time to cover the 2500km. Long-distance buses typically leave at 6am or earlier.

Car & Motorcycle

If you're bringing a 4WD or motorcycle, you'll need a *carnet de passage*, the vehicle's registration papers and proof of third-party insurance covering Ethiopia.

Ethiopia doesn't recognise international driving licences for more than seven days, so you're supposed to acquire an Ethiopian-endorsed licence at the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (☎ 0115 506561; Yohanis St) in Addis Ababa. This is rarely enforced and most travellers take the chance.

Hiring 4WDs (with mandatory driver) is costly (US\$90 to US\$180 per day) and primarily done through travel agencies (p657).

Tours

For independent travellers, organising a private tour (kitschy packaged tours don't exist) is useful for four things: specialised activities like white-water rafting; access to remote regions like the Lower Omo Valley or the Danakil Depression; 'themed trips' (eg bird-watching) with expert guides; and to help those with more money than time.

See p657 for a recommended list of agencies based in Addis Ababa.

Trucks

In remote regions, like the Lower Omo Valley, trucks running between villages are the only way to travel. Seats in the cabin cost twice as much as riding in the back (always negotiable). Petrol stations and markets are typical collection points.

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